

## **The Call-on-Hold as Conversational Resource**

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(in TEXT, 25, 2005. PP. 149-170)

A man is being overpowered. He is on his back on the floor, his assailant's brutish, snarling face only inches from his own. Hairy fingers are closing on his windpipe. In a panic, he reaches behind his head, groping for something to use as a weapon. His hand closes on a telephone, an old-style, heavy, dial telephone. He brings it down with all his remaining force on his attacker's head, knocking him unconscious. 'Thank God', he mutters, 'that I didn't let Mary convince me to switch to a cell phone'.

This scene, or something very like it, will be familiar to anyone who watches movies regularly. It has two kinds of relevance to the subject matter of this essay. First, it is a metaphor, although a sloppy one, for the conversational events that I will describe, in which a telephone is used opportunistically to loosen an interlocutor's conversational grip. Second, it illustrates how we improvise with whatever resources we have at hand. A telephone may be a clumsy hitting instrument—it wasn't designed for that—but it will raise a lump.

Although language and paralinguistic are our primary conversational tools, the physical world has always been available to us as a conversational resource. First, and most obviously, as a topic. Second, as an indexical complement and context to our linguistic expressions, a necessary element in the making of meaning. Third, as a distraction, a topic changer. A woman, asked an awkward question, drops her purse or spills her wine, creating a mini-emergency. Or, to take a less cinematic

example, we may suddenly notice the time when a conversation becomes tiresome. There is surely no need to demonstrate that physical objects are articulated with our talk in a wide variety of ways. In addition, in modern life, our talk is increasingly mediated by noncorporeal physical means—email, fax, and the telephone, for example. There is by now a vast literature on all of this, both popular and academic. The point that will engage us here is that the very availability of these communications media, aside from the communication that they facilitate, provides a strategic resource for the conversationalist. The telephone can be put to subtler uses than conversing or hitting people over the head.

Telephone calls do not reliably, or usually, occur at the moment when they are needed to disengage us from a particular, troublesome situation. If that moment is a known-in-advance point on a time scale, we can prearrange to have the call occur; again, a familiar film device. But this ploy does not work when one is dealing with unpredictable moments in interactional time. The advent of call-holding provides for greater flexibility. The caller-on-hold can be saved, although for a limited period of time, for the moment of greatest need. The requirement to answer a call-on-hold is not as urgent as a ringing phone or a call-waiting beep (Hopper 1991, 1992), but, for that very reason, answering can be put off to a convenient or useful moment. The difference between an unwelcome obligation and a conversational resource may be nothing more than the moment at which it occurs. The opportunity to choose that moment increases the chances of turning an interactional liability into an asset.

## TAKING A CALL

The exchange under consideration is from the Donahue/Posner show on CNBC, October 14, 1993. This day's show was on the subject of sexual harassment. In addition to the regular panel of Phil Donahue and Vladimir Posner, Debbie Brake of The National Women's Law Center was also commenting, via TV feed. The show began with a discussion of a harassment case that was currently before the Supreme Court. Then they took phone calls which dealt with various harassment-related matters, but not necessarily with the Supreme Court case. One call was from a man who described some circumstances relating to a charge of sexual harassment that had been lodged against him. After talking to the caller, the following exchange took place:

(1) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 14, 1993)<sup>i</sup>

1. Posner: You know there's one point he ((the previous
2. caller)) may be making (.5) and that is that
3. sometimes women will use: .hh this whole
4. issue: .hh (.) an' it- (.) like anyone will there
5. are oppor[tunities (.) among
6. Donahue: [It is possible to abuse this.
7. P: Right=
8. D: =Sit down on a park bench a woman starts crying
9. rape.
10. P: Well I=
11. D: =I don't think th[at- I think that's very rare
12. P: [Well I'll tell you what

13.           (.) I (was in) (.) I was in a bu:s in New York  
 14.           City=I got up to give my seat to a woman (.) who  
 15.           told me: (.) I was a male sexist (.) because I (.)  
 16.           I was taught by my mother that when a woman comes  
 17.           in an' she's got no place to sit down=  
 18. D:        =Yeah  
 19. P:        you: get up as a sign of respect.=  
 20. D:        =She thought [you were being patronizing?=  
 21. P:                                [(So you know)  
 22. P:        =and she thought I was [hitting on her or=  
 23. D:                                [(you were \* izing her)=  
 24. P:        =something. I don' know  
 25. D:        =No no no she was sa[ying don't treat me  
 26. Brake:                            [Let me just bring us back t'  
 27.           r:eality [here. There's a very big difference=  
 28. D:                                [Yeah  
 29. B:        =betwee::n: T.hh calling someone a sexist for  
 30.           giving up their sea:t and actually bringing a  
 31.           sexual harassment claim.  
 32. ?:        (\*[\*)  
 33. B:        [.hh Really no woman wants to be dra:gged through  
 34.           the mu::d in the way that a sexual harassment  
 35.           victim is dragged through the mu::d (.) unless  
 36.           something very serious happened to her: (.) that  
 37.           was discriminatory in the workplace. (.5)  
 38. D:        Yeah (.) .hh uh:: (1) Atlanta I c'n- I remember the  
 39.           fi:rst ti:me -I referred (1) to- A- Atlanta Georgia

40. are ya there? ((last five words in a louder,  
 41. 'calling' tone of voice))  
 42. Caller from Atlanta: Yes sir  
 43. D: Uh: (.) jus' to- gi- I- I once (.) I- this is  
 44. twenty five years ago I was moderating a panel (.)  
 45. and a woman (.) raised her hand=it was my job to  
 46. call on people .hh I said ye:s ho:ney? (1) ((let's  
 47. jaw drop and then falls back in his chair with open  
 48. mouth, as if to say 'Oh boy, what a mistake!' or  
 49. 'Can you imagine?!' Posner begins to speak during  
 50. the course of this gesture.))  
 51. P: Oh (that'll) O::h (.) ye::s (.5) [ri:ght  
 52. D: [A- It was the  
 53. beginning of my: o::wn: (.) coming of age so to  
 54. speak for the second ti::me That is a- that is a  
 55. pa:tronizing [wo:rd  
 56. P: [Now what if a wo-  
 57. D: Who do [I think I a:m calling this  
 58. P: [Wha- (.) wha- What if a wo:man had been up  
 59. there and a ma:n had raised his hand and she said  
 60. okay you hunk (.) Whatta you wanna say. Would that  
 61. be::?  
 62. D: ye- uh  
 63. P: hu:h?  
 64. D: a[:h  
 65. P: [Would i:t? (.8) Come o:n Phi:l .hh ther- You go  
 66. too fA::r with thi[s



interpretation of his (Donahue's) story, and Donahue eventually changes the subject, going back to an earlier topic.

This summary glosses over a multitude of analytically interesting details. I will not, however, undertake an utterance-by-utterance analysis of this exchange. My major interest is in lines 38-50, where Donahue takes the call from Atlanta. The overall topic of the show is sexual harassment, and Debbie Brake is both a woman and an expert on the topic. Donahue and Posner have, to this point, treated her with great deference. Now she has called on them to cease an animated discussion of a certain matter and return to what she considers serious business. In lines 38-40, immediately following Brake's objection, Donahue takes a call, saying 'Yeah (.) .hh uh:: (1) Atlanta I c'n- I remember the fi:rst ti:me - I referred (1) to- A- Atlanta Georgia are ya there'?

Donahue begins his utterance in lines 38-40 with the most minimal and noncommittal recognition of Brake's previous utterance, a soft, low-pitched, intonationally flat 'yeah'. The minimal acknowledgment, sometimes followed by a pause, is a common way of making a transition to a new topic. Jefferson (1993) notes that 'yeah', 'yah', and 'yes', said by a recipient in a flat, 'nonengaged' tone and coming at a point of possible utterance completion, frequently precede introduction of a new topic by the recipient. Moreover, examination of her examples reveals that the recipient frequently leaves a pause between the acknowledgment token and the opening of the new topic. Sometimes the pause is unfilled, but in this case it is partly filled by 'uh::'. Sacks (1992, vol. 2: 496-8) pointed out that 'uh' has a conversational function; it claims or holds the floor for a prospective or current speaker. The 'uh::' in line 38 is itself preceded by an audible inbreath, which commonly indicates an intention

to speak. In this way, Donahue is able to pause for an appreciable period of conversational time (the pause consisting of the micropause, the inbreath, the elongated 'uh::', and the following second of silence) and still maintain control of the turn at talk. With only a micropause between his 'yeah' and his audible inbreath, he leaves little opportunity for another speaker to begin a turn. For another speaker to begin during the inbreath or, even more so, during the 'uh::', or in the one second pause after 'uh::', could be taken as interruptive.

The turn, then, has a shape which is common in topic shifts. Of course, a call-in show may include somewhat different practices with regard to topic shift than ordinary conversation. It is apparently primarily Donahue's role to organize topics and participants, and one way that he does this is by taking calls. There are four occasions on the show, including the one we are examining, when the sequence is Brake-speaks followed by Donahue-takes-a-call. The first of these sequences is structurally very similar to the one we have been looking at:

(2) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 14, 1993)

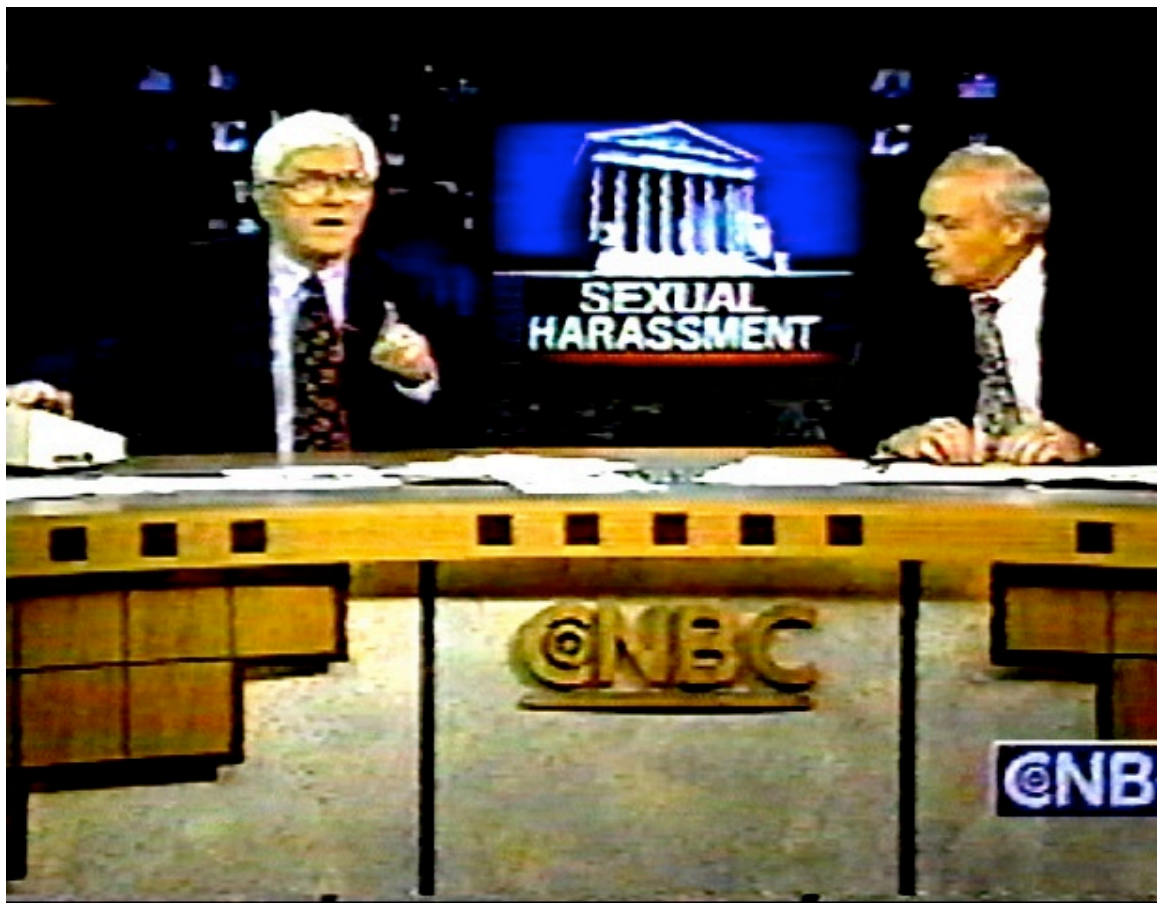
1. D: ...a one time only incident is not enough to get
2. you before the supreme a du- b- before a court of
3. law and entitle you to redress from our judicial
4. system. Do I understand you- b- what you're
5. [saying.
6. B: [Yeah I'd like ta- I like to qualify that. ... What
7. the court said is that a single epithet or single
8. racist or sexist joke is not enough. (.5)
9. D: (°All right°) .hh Ah Kalamazoo are you there?



Again, in line 9, we see the minimal acknowledgment, inbreath, and filled pause, followed by the call opening. In the second Brake-to-caller transition, there is a .5 second pause after Brake's utterance, followed immediately by Donahue's 'Kalamazoo: Michigan.=Thanks'.<sup>ii</sup> (He is retaking the call from Kalamazoo, which he had previously deferred in order to take a station break.) The final such transition occurs at the end of the show. Just as Brake appears to have come to the end of her utterance, Posner begins to comment, and Donahue cuts in almost immediately to take a call.<sup>iii</sup> In the context of these other transitions, there is nothing peculiar or abrupt about the one we are examining. In fact, of the four transitions, Donahue's line 38 is perhaps the most elaborate and least abrupt.

What needs to be established next is that the taking of a call is a regular site of topic change. Having indicated an intention to speak further, by means of his inbreath and 'uh', Donahue then says 'Atlanta', turning his attention for the first time to a new participant, the caller from Atlanta. In order to see the significance of this move, we have to note that, in turning to a new addressee, he is, first, turning away from the previous speaker and, second, not turning to Posner. He is addressing someone who has had no part in the previous discussion. He is thus establishing a new 'participation framework' (see Goffman 1974, Goodwin and Goodwin 1990, Hanks 1996, Irvine 1996, Levinson 1988), one which includes himself, the caller, and possibly Posner, who sometimes participates in conversations with the callers. Brake is excluded; she never interacts with callers.

Donahue's bodily orientation is also significant. In lines 38-40, he faces the camera (and thus the caller). As he says 'I remember', he turns his head slightly to his left, toward Posner, who is looking at Donahue. The camera cuts away to the call board, showing 'line 5 - Atlanta'. When it cuts back to Donahue, he is once again fully facing the camera, as he says 'A- Atlanta are you there'?



In lines 38-40, then, Donahue is talking to the caller from Atlanta, although a subtle head gesture suggests that Posner may also be an addressee.

At this point, we need to consider how phone call openings are accomplished on this program. Schegloff (1968) notes that the ringing of a phone, like calling someone's name, is a summons. Normally, we pick

up the phone and say ‘hello’. This is not a greeting, but an answer to the summons, establishing our availability for interaction. The summons-answer sequence is an ‘adjacency pair’, since the summons specifically calls for an answer in the next turn. It happens, though, that the first and second parts of adjacency pairs are not always adjacent. For example, an answer to a question may be preceded by an inserted question-answer sequence, as in the following transcript, where a caller to a suicide prevention center is asking about how the center helps suicidal people.

(3) From Sacks (1992, vol. 1, p. 54)

B: In what way?

A: Well, let me ask you this. Are you calling about yourself?

B: Yes, uh huh

A: Well, what we do is talk with them. ...

In the case of talk shows, as with many business calls, the call is first received by an intermediary who puts the caller on hold. When the intended recipient finally takes the call, he produces an answer to the summons, rather as if he were answering a ringing phone. Thus, the sequence in which the caller is put on hold is, or is similar to, an insertion sequence. (Although the inserted sequence may contain an answer to the summons, it is not the ‘definitive’ answer, which must be produced by the intended recipient.) A universal function of the answer is to establish the recipient’s availability for interaction. The exception that perhaps proves the rule is the answer followed by further deferral:

(4) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Los Angeles, you're there aren't you?

C: Yes I am.

D: All right, you're first when we come back ((from a commercial break)). Hang on a minute. We want you on.

Having answered, he must put her 'on hold' again or she will assume that he is available for interaction.

The shape of Donahue's call-openings is distinctive. As Hutchby (1991, 1999) notes, the call-opening on talk shows is 'compacted'. A fully developed telephone opening sequence contains four elements—a summons/answer sequence, an identification sequence, a greeting sequence, and an exchange of 'how are you' sequences (Schegloff 1986, 2000a). In the talk show openings, the 'how are you's', to begin with, are usually absent. The interactants are unacquainted, and anyway such personal small talk would presumably be out of place on a show devoted to discussion of serious topics. Identification sequences are also absent. Donahue is already known to the caller and the audience. The only necessary item of identification for the caller is the place from which the call originates. This is known in advance by Donahue and provided by him to the audience in his call answer. Indeed, the place name (city and, usually, state) is the only element of the call opening that is dependably present in all the calls that Donahue takes. (In Hutchby's samples, the caller's name is also mentioned, but this, too, is known in advance to, and announced by, the host.)

Donahue's call-receptions include at least one of four additional elements. (My data consist of 18 phone calls—all that were made on the

two shows that I recorded—and 22 openings. There are more openings than calls because four of the calls that Donahue took were opened, then deferred and reopened.) The additional elements of Donahue's call-receptions, none of which are universally present, are: 1. Greeting ('Chattanooga Tennessee. Hi'.), which sometimes but not always elicits a return greeting. 2. Clearance ('Dallas we have just seconds. What did you want to say Dallas'.) 3. Acknowledgment for waiting ('New York City. Hi. I'm glad you waited'.) Acknowledgments in my data were always accompanied by either greetings or clearances. 4. Summons. ('Los Angeles, you're there aren't you'.)

Most interesting, in the present context, is that Donahue's openings frequently include a summons. When we answer a ringing phone, we presume that the caller is available to talk. This cannot be so readily assumed when dealing with a call-on-hold. The caller may have hung up or stepped away from the phone.<sup>iv</sup> One might want to argue, then, that a summons is implicit in all of Donahue's call-receptions. There is no apparent difference between the calls which are received with an explicit summons and those which are not. In all calls-on-hold, there is the risk that the caller is unavailable at the moment when the call is taken. It might be reasonable, then, to view the verbalized summons as an occasional explicit expression of the summons which is otherwise implicit in all of Donahue's call-receptions.

There is another sense in which Donahue's call-receptions may be viewed as summons (of sorts), in that they require the caller to speak. They summon the caller, who has been waiting quietly, to begin conversing. The frequent presence of clearances in Donahue's openings suggest that this matter is salient in his calls in a way that it is not in

ordinary phone calls. The presence of acknowledgments also recognizes that the caller has been waiting to speak and is now permitted to do so.

Whatever the merits of such arguments, though, we must not let them obscure the fact that there is something special, because of its sequential implications, about the explicit summons. The explicit summons, like the greeting, is a first pair-part, and, as such, requires a specific second pair-part (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). It is of some interest that the force of greetings as first pair-parts seems to be attenuated in the Donahue-Posner call-ins. Of the seven greetings in my data (not counting the one in which the caller was unavailable), only two were reciprocated. In this connection, two of the openings were of special interest.

(5) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Are you there Gulf//breeze. Hi.

C: Yes

C: Yes. I'd like to say....

(6) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Boca Raton Florida. Are you there. Hi.

C: Yes I'm here.

D: You wanted to say

C: ...

In both of these openings, a summons was immediately followed by a greeting. Although one might expect a bias toward responding to the greeting, on the grounds that it occurred last and so was immediately prior to the response, and that a return greeting would, in effect, answer the summons by demonstrating that the caller was available, in both cases the response was a second pair-part to the summons. Of the seven occurrences of summons in the data, only one did not elicit a second pair-part (instead the caller launched directly into her topic). I will not

speculate here as to why the explicit summons is, on this show, a more powerful first pair-part than the greeting. The crucial point is that the summons effectively functions as the first pair-part of an adjacency pair.

The analytically significant consequence of this fact is that the caller, in his first turn, sometimes does not introduce his topic—he may simply respond to the summons. (In contrast, a clearance seems to require the caller to begin topical talk.) Alternatively, the caller may, in his first turn, respond to the summons and then continue with topical talk. It is on the availability of both these options that my analysis turns.

Schegloff (1968) notes that, a summons-answer sequence having occurred, it is the summoner's right and obligation to talk. I have noted that, in his answer, Donahue, in his call-receptions, includes an explicit clearance signal. What happens when he doesn't? Ordinarily, the caller, having received an answer (without a further deferral) simply goes on to open his topic:

(7) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 14, 1993)

D: Chattanooga Tennessee. Hi.

C: Yeah. I like your comment about a situation down here where a gentleman is suing his boss....

(8) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 14, 1993)

D: New York City. Hi. I'm glad you waited.

C: Thanks yeah. Uh I'm involved presently involved in a case against my boss....

What happens, though, when Donahue's answer contains an explicit summons? This is an interesting case because now both parties are summoners. After the caller answers Donahue's summons, whose turn is it to speak, the caller's (the original summoner) or Donahue's (the most recent summoner)? As already mentioned, I find two forms in my data. In one, the callers first turn is an answer, and then Donahue gives the caller clearance to speak (unless he defers the call in favor of a commercial break):

(9) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Boca Raton Florida. Are you there. Hi.

C: Yes I'm here.

D: You wanted to say.

C: ((opens topic))

In the second form, the caller does not wait for a clearance:

(10) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Gulfbreeze Florida are you there?

C: Yes .hhh [I-

D: [Okay I'll give you a chance. But I ask you  
to indulge us this one break....

In (10), the caller, having answered Donahue's summons, takes an audible inbreath, signaling an intention to continue. She actually does begin a further bit of talk, but Donahue overlaps at that point. The way in which he requests her to wait seems to indicate an awareness that she



was about to continue. Upon returning from commercial break, Donahue again summons the caller:

(11) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 21, 1993)

D: Are you there Gulf[breeze. Hi.

C: [Yes.

C: Yes. I'd like to say....

Again, although Donahue has issued the most recent summons, it is the caller who attempts, successfully this time, to open the topic. The normal practice seems to be that the original summoner has the right to open the topic.<sup>v</sup> If Donahue does a summons of his own, the caller may answer and continue to talk. If the caller does not continue, Donahue issues a clearance cue, whereupon the caller begins.

The caller's topic will be on the general subject of the show and possibly a reaction to something said earlier in the show. But it will not ordinarily be, and is not expected to be, a continuation of the discussion immediately prior to Donahue's taking the call. There is a time lag between the moment when the caller decides that he has something to say and picks up the phone and the time when the call is taken by Donahue. For this reason, and because the caller initiates the topic, the taking of a call is a regular and known site of topical discontinuity.<sup>vi</sup> (See Hester and Fitzgerald, 1999, for further analysis of openings in talk show calls.)

## HOLDING THE FLOOR

In the light of the discussion so far, it is evident that Donahue's handling of the Atlanta call is peculiar, in that it is Donahue who supplies first topic in what is normally a caller's-topic slot. How he goes about doing this is of some interest. Donahue does not provide for the caller to speak next. Instead, he begins (or rather prefaces) a story: 'I c'n- I remember the first time I referred (1) to-'. A second oddity is that the story does not even appear (from the preface) to be designed for the recipient. Seemingly, the only way Donahue could design a story specifically for this recipient would be to make the story about Atlanta, since he knows nothing about the caller except his or her location. There is no internal evidence that Donahue is breaking any rules (that is, no one reacts in such a way as to make apparent that a normative violation has occurred), but he is certainly proceeding in an unusual and unexpected way.<sup>vii</sup>

In all the call-openings in my data set, the place name is accompanied by one of the other four elements. This is true also of the 'Atlanta' opening, which includes a summons. What is unusual here is that a story preface is inserted between the place name and the summons.

His story preface consists of an incomplete sentence. An incomplete sentence may appear to be a kind of mistake or disfluency, but sometimes there are good conversational reasons for incomplete sentences. They allow one to do a piece of conversational work--in this case, to establish that he has a story to tell--without reaching a transition-relevance place, where an interlocutor might try for a turn at talk. (See Sacks 1974. It is to be noted that, although Donahue's 'I

remember the first time I referred to-' conveys a good deal of information, its completion is not projectable. That is, it is not apparent from what he has already said how he will complete his sentence. If the sentence were incomplete in only a technical, syntactical sense, there might be grounds for treating it as complete-for-practical-purposes. It has been found that overlaps frequently occur before a syntactic unit has been completed but at a point where it seems clear what that completion will consist of [Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974]. But what Donahue has produced is not merely an incomplete sentence; it is also, visibly, an incomplete message. The hearer cannot tell who he referred to or how.) Self-interruption may also have, and in this case does have, another function. It can display a sudden 'realization', a remembering of something that takes precedence over the line of activity that one is engaged in. More on this momentarily.

There are settings in which 'I can remember the first time...' might not be heard as a story preface. In this interactional setting, though, it is clear that Donahue has a story to tell. Sacks (1974, 1992, vol. 2: 10ff.) has noted some ways in which a story preface can function. It can solicit permission to tell the story. It can give information about the story and so allow the hearer to advise the prospective teller that the story is already known or is not of interest. (Donahue's preface does not appear to have either of these functions.) In giving information about the story, it may supply clues as to when the story will be possibly complete, and what sort of reaction would be appropriate. So, if the story is about 'a funny thing', it will not be complete until a funny thing is related. This feature is related to another, which is that the story preface, in advising the hearer that a story is coming, also solicits an extended turn at

speaking. If a story is in progress, then the hearer should (with some exceptions) properly wait until the story is completed before taking a turn at talk. Donahue, then, is simultaneously using two techniques to maintain his control of the floor. He stops in the middle of a sentence, thus parenthesizing the exchange that follows, and he indicates that he is embarked on a story-telling.

He does not launch directly into the story. Instead, he turns back to the caller: 'A- Atlanta Georgia are ya there'? Donahue's lines 38-40 seems superficially to be a disfluent utterance. Having answered the call, he begins on a story and then, 'realizing' that the caller has not yet spoken, interrupts himself to address the caller with a summons. In fact, though, this utterance can be seen to be delicately designed. By doing a story preface, Donahue establishes that he is to open the next topic and occupy the next extended turn at talk. His next speaking rights are reinforced by his self-interruption. Only after establishing his conversational rights does he allow the caller to speak. 'Atlanta Georgia are ya there'? could be heard as a simple summons. As Schegloff (1968) shows, a summons calls for an answer establishing the addressed person's availability for interaction. Upon receiving an answer, the turn-at-talk reverts to the summoner. But in the call-in show context, as we have seen, this type of summons can be heard as an invitation to speak one's piece, so we could get something like:

(16) Invented exchange

A: Atlanta Georgia are you there?

B: Yes I was wondering...

Donahue has effectively cut off this option by establishing, before allowing the caller to speak, that he (Donahue) has the floor. The caller replies accordingly (line 42), with a simple statement of her availability, and Donahue goes on with his story. Although Donahue presents his invitation to the caller to speak as something that he had merely forgotten to do in its proper place, that ‘forgetting’ turns out to have implications for who controls the floor.

Why does Donahue bother to do this summons at all? Why not just go ahead and tell his story? In examining the 16 other call openings in my corpus, it is notable that, in every case, the callers get to speak, at least to establish that they are ‘there’, available for interaction, immediately after Donahue takes the call, before any topic is established. Even when he is addressing the caller merely for the purpose of putting him on hold, he gives the caller a chance to respond. Here is one of several examples:

(17) Donahue-Posner (Oct. 14, 1993)

D: Kalamazoo are you there

C: Yes I am.

D: All right, I want you to kindly wait for us here. We  
have a break and I promise you we will get back to you.

In general, interactional sequences begin with a display that the prospective participants are interactionally present. Presumably, it is part of a standard and proper call opening, on this show at least, for the caller to respond.<sup>viii</sup> As I have already noted, the call-on-hold provides an especially strong impetus for the demand that the caller be given the opportunity for immediate response—the caller may, in fact, not be

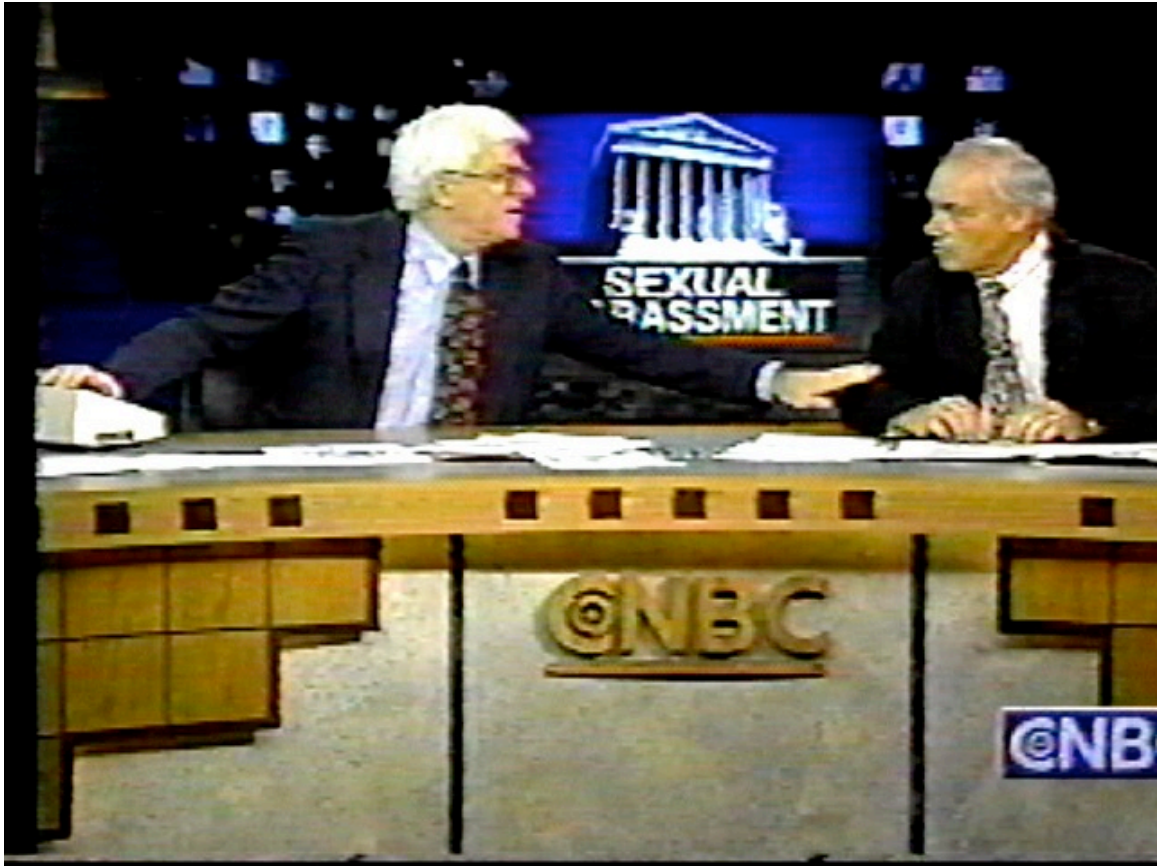
available at the moment when the call is answered. Ordinarily, providing for caller response is not an issue because, after Donahue's answer, the floor would revert to the caller. In lines 38-40, however, Donahue starts to go on to other business before allowing the caller to respond, and thus complete the call opening.<sup>ix</sup> His summons to the caller is then presented as a self-interruption, a realization that there is unfinished business. Lines 38-40 simultaneously take a call, thereby establishing a new-topic slot, and reserve for Donahue the first topical talk in that slot.

### HOLDING THE TOPIC

Why go through the charade of taking a call, and thus presumably beginning a new topic, when Donahue is in fact going to continue discussion of the previous topic? Recall that Brake has demanded a change of topic. By taking a phone call, Donahue projects such a change, acquiescing to Brake's demand. He also projects a new participation framework in which the caller will be a principle interlocutor. That is, taking a call has a 'more or less guaranteed reading' (Sacks 1992: 414). But he undermines the call scenario by maintaining control of the topic. As can be seen in the transcript, he goes on to continue his previous discussion with Posner, continuing the very topic that Brake has objected to, under cover of taking a call. The guaranteed reading is, as it turns out, a misreading. Although this eventually becomes apparent, a direct confrontation with Brake (that is, a direct and open flouting of her wishes) is avoided. Indeed, the misdirection is such that the casual hearer may not notice that Donahue has failed to comply with Brake's demand.

Donahue finds himself in a sequential setting where, if he continues his discussion with Posner, he will visibly be ignoring Brake, since she has expressed a wish that any next utterance not be on the topic that Posner and Donahue had been discussing, that they 'get back to reality'. Change or nonchange of topic has been made relevant and noticeable by Brake's objection. By 'designing'<sup>x</sup> lines 38-40 in the way he does, as a site for a new topic, he appears to accede to her wish, although he does not actually address it, except perhaps with his minimal 'yeah'. The transition to a new caller is not unusual or abrupt in the context of this show. It is Donahue's role to move the show along, taking new calls at appropriate moments, particularly when topics seem to have reached some sort of closure or impasse. When Donahue tells his story in lines 43-46, he does not mark it as a second story or as a continuation of a prior topic. (He does, however, give a hint in line 43 with his 'jus' to- gi-'. This may be an aborted form of 'just to give an example'. That he aborts is significant, since the completed phrase would have been an overt marker of topical continuity, and the continuity would turn out to be with his previous discussion with Posner, which Brake has objected to.)

Donahue's talk is designed in such a way as to produce an appearance of complying with Brake's directive while continuing his discussion with Posner. Only in the course of lines 43-46, as he reorients his upper body, and in fact reaches out and touches Posner, does it become clear that his story is actually, or at least primarily, for Posner, not for the caller.



Only by attending to the details of the story and its evaluation does one see that the story is actually a continuation of the earlier topic. (Note in particular that his story turns out to be about a time when he patronized a woman. This is what he suggested that Posner may have done, at least in the view of the woman in Posner's story.) Thus, it eventually becomes clear (at least to a certain kind of observer) that the caller is not the 'actual' recipient of Donahue's talk but is being used by Donahue as an instrument for evading Brake's objection without overtly ignoring or defying Brake.

In summary, Donahue uses his lines 38-40 to (apparently) set up a new recipient and a new topic, in response to Brake's objections. At the same time, he provides for his control of the topic. Lines 38-40 have a very unusual design in that they do not allow the caller to initiate a topic



or even to speak until Donahue has established his own control of the floor. We cannot tell right off that the story he is projecting, by virtue of its placement or use of overt markers, will be a second story to Posner's. Having handled Brake's objection by creating an appearance of moving on to a new topic, Donahue then turns to Posner and tells his story, thus reestablishing both the participation framework and the topic that existed prior to Brake's objection.

## DISCUSSION

The situations that we find ourselves in on a daily basis frequently do not provide us with resources that are pre-designed to handle all the contingencies that may arise. We have to do our best with whatever we can find there-and-then. In conversation, as in other endeavors, we use what is available to us at the moment to solve the problems of the moment. However we preplan, anticipate, and schedule, the unique, emergent, contingent, and urgent quality of the here-and-now cannot be averted or nullified. Donahue's use of the call-on-hold is an example of the sort of complex and subtle behavior that interactants are capable of, and their ingenuity at dealing with unforeseen contingencies.

There is more to say here, though, than that we deal with diverse and unpredictable problems in diverse and unpredictable ways. Donahue's use of the call-on-hold would seem to be an example of what Sacks (1992: 254, see also Edwards 1997: chapter 4) calls 'subversion'. Subversion involves producing an appearance associated with conventional understandings to cover an act that departs from those expectations. My favorite example is from (who else?) Goffman (1972:

265, taken from The New York Times, May 10, 1970), although Goffman didn't use the term 'subversion':

Shamokin, PA. (AP) A hit-and-run driver fooled several witnesses who saw him hit another automobile.

The driver got out of his car after an accident, went to the damaged car and left this note:

'I have just hit your car. People are watching me. They think I'm leaving my name. But I'm not'.

Donahue's taking of the call-on-hold perhaps did not actually cover his return to the old, forbidden topic, but it did serve as a diversion and a new context, a kind of smokescreen. It subverted normal expectations regarding the function of calls on call-in shows generally and on this show in particular.

A good deal of attention has been given to the structure of phone conversations (Hopper 1991, 1992; Hutchby 1991, 1999, 2001; Sacks 1992, starting with his first published lecture and in a number of other lectures throughout the book; Schegloff 1968, 1979, 1986, 2002a, 2002b). My concern here, though, has been not just with structure but also with another aspect of phone calls—their very occurrence as a socially significant event. Hopper (1992: 3) writes of the 'power' of the ringing phone. We feel compelled to answer it.<sup>xi</sup> Godard (1977) notes that in France it is more or less obligatory to apologize in the call opening for disturbing the answerer, except when the answerer is an intimate. This practice reveals a recognition of the call as an obligation imposed on the called.

It seems something of an oversimplification, though, to view phone answering as something one does purely from a sense of obligation. The call may bring us something that we do not want to miss—good, important, interesting, or urgent news, or simply the opportunity for a pleasant conversation. Whatever the incentive, though, there is a powerful impetus to answer a ringing phone, and even the advent of the answering machine has, for many or most, only slightly mitigated the urge-to-answer.<sup>xii</sup>

The phone call, from this point of view, is a member of a larger set—occurrences or matters that require our attention. These matters can be divided into three broad types: 1. Those that can be put off until the current business has been completed. While engaged in conversation, I may recall or be reminded that I have a book that needs to be returned to the library. Usually, this will not cause any break in the ongoing interaction. 2. Those that are urgent enough to intrude into the current situation but not of such immediate urgency that they require attention at the very moment of occurrence. The call-on-hold is of this type. 3. Those that, claimably, require immediate attention, such as the ringing phone, the call-waiting beep, or spilled wine. Types 2 and 3 might be called ‘exigencies’. Because exigencies are common, and because they probably have enough structural and functional regularity to permit of some generalization, they may constitute a worthy topic of sociological study. Any such study will need to consider exigencies not only as unwelcome distractions but as possible resources for handling troublesome situations.

The taking of a call-on-hold is somewhat different than the taking of an ordinary or call-waiting call. (I draw on Hopper’s [1991, 1992]

analysis of the latter.) It is my impression that one usually waits to the completion of, or at least for a temporary pause in, sequential business before taking a call-on-hold. That is, one ordinarily waits for a transition relevance place and avoids interrupting an adjacency pair, and may even wait for a possible topic ending. (If the call-taker intends to continue current business after taking the call, he will ordinarily say something to put his interlocutor 'on hold' while he takes the call.) The ringing telephone and the call waiting beep are apparently more urgent, and frequently involve interruption of sequential business. In all of these cases, though, if the taking of the call has interrupted topical business, it is usual for that business to be resumed after the call is done. In the talk show setting, where there is great flexibility in the taking of calls-on-hold, and where the taking of such a call generally results in topic shift, the taking of a call signals the end of the prior topical/sequential business. It would be surprising were Donahue to accept the call and then return to deal with Brake's objection in lines 26-37, and in fact he does not do so. What he does do, contrary to the expectation that he himself has created, is to return to the topic that he and Posner were discussing and that Brake objected to. He partially disguises that return to prior topic by putting it in the 'frame' of taking a call-on-hold.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> I am using standard conversation-analytic transcription conventions, with two additions. Each asterisk (\*) in parenthesis represents approximately one-half second of speech that the analyst has been unable to transcribe. Also, a short dash immediately preceding a word indicates a 'disconnected articulation', produced as though it were at the beginning of an utterance.

<sup>ii</sup> D: Ho- how might you want to respond to Mr. Posner's observation. (.8)

B: I would like to say:: that no woman: in this country: (.) would like to be required by her boss to pick coins out of his front pocket.... and in this country: -we have made a determination: (.) tha:t sex discrimination on the jo:b is not something to be tolerated (.5) and someho:w: -we: have not applied that consistently to sexual harrassment cases. (.5)

D: Kalamazoo: Michigan.=Thanks.

<sup>iii</sup> B: ...would not be prohibited.

D: So you could call a guy a faggot you can't call somebody a nigger. (1.5)

B: I'm afraid under federal law: tha:t (.) that's the case right now.

P: (\*\*)=

D: E- Southfield Michigan. Hi.

<sup>iv</sup> In my corpus there is one call where the caller turned out to be unavailable.

D: Denver Colorado we're glad you waited. Hi. (1.5) Are you there Denver? (1) You're not there.

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<sup>v</sup>Consider this example from Schegloff (1968). The labels in double parentheses are my own:

Phone rings ((summons))

M: MacNamara ((answer)) (pause) Hello? ((summons))

E: Yeah ((answer)) uh John?

M: Yeah.

E: I was just....

We see here again that, although M issues the second summons, it is E that opens the topic. An apparent exception to this general practice may occur when the caller is returning a call. In such a case, the recipient may open the first topic. However, the exception is only apparent. The caller is, in effect, the second summoner, having been previously summoned by the present recipient.

<sup>vi</sup>The caller may, however, make reference to whatever discussion was taking place while the caller was on hold. So, in the case of the caller from Atlanta, when she eventually gets to speak, she makes a brief comment on the previous caller's reported behavior before getting to the topic of her call.

<sup>vii</sup>Perhaps, if Donahue were not the host of the show or otherwise in a position of power relative to the caller, his seizure of the opening topic would be an occasion for objection or sanction by the caller.

<sup>viii</sup>This is not universally the case. It is not unusual, in the U.S. at least, for a switchboard receptionist to open with 'Hold, please,' and put the caller

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on hold without waiting for a response. Perhaps I am not the only one who finds this practice abrupt and borderline rude.

<sup>ix</sup> Schegloff (2002a) suggests that the main significance of call openings, and the main reason for studying them, is in the ways that they are consequential for the further development of the conversation.

<sup>x</sup>I put designing in quotation marks because 'design' implies intentionality and planning. The shape of lines 38-40 might be unplanned. Perhaps Donahue did have a sudden memory immediately after starting to take the call. Nevertheless, the turn did ultimately have a certain shape which efficiently produced a certain effect. If Donahue wanted to appear deferential to Brake while at the same time defying her demand, and if he had planned a way to accomplish that, he might have designed an utterance like lines 38-40.

<sup>xi</sup> This is not as true as it used to be. The advent of the answering machine has made it possible to put the call off without losing it and to screen out the calls we don't want. In fact, it seems odd that we don't rely more heavily on the answering machine to screen our calls, especially given the prevalence of unwelcome phone solicitations. See Schegloff (2002b) for further consideration of the implications of technological advances.

<sup>xii</sup> The worldwide popularity of cellphones has further increased the role of phones in our lives; this despite the availability and widespread use of email and fax.





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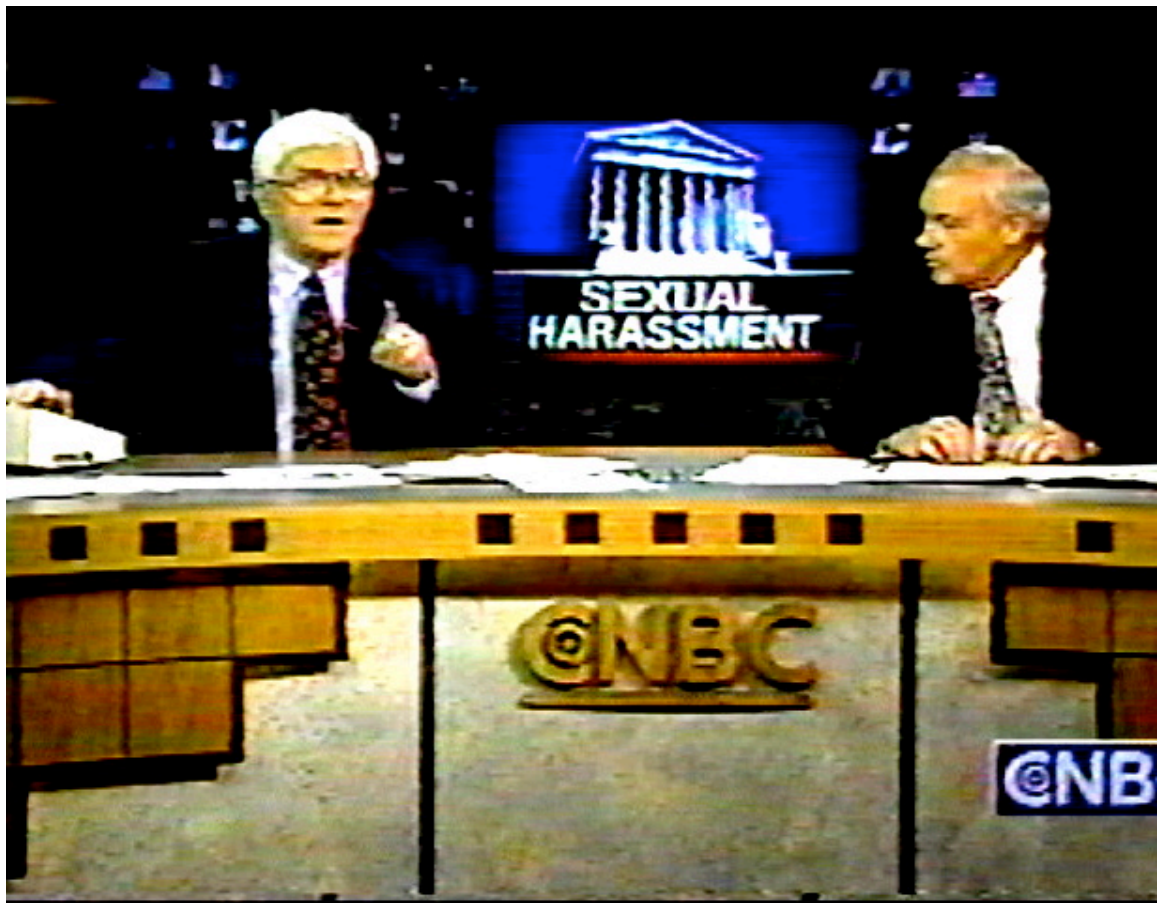
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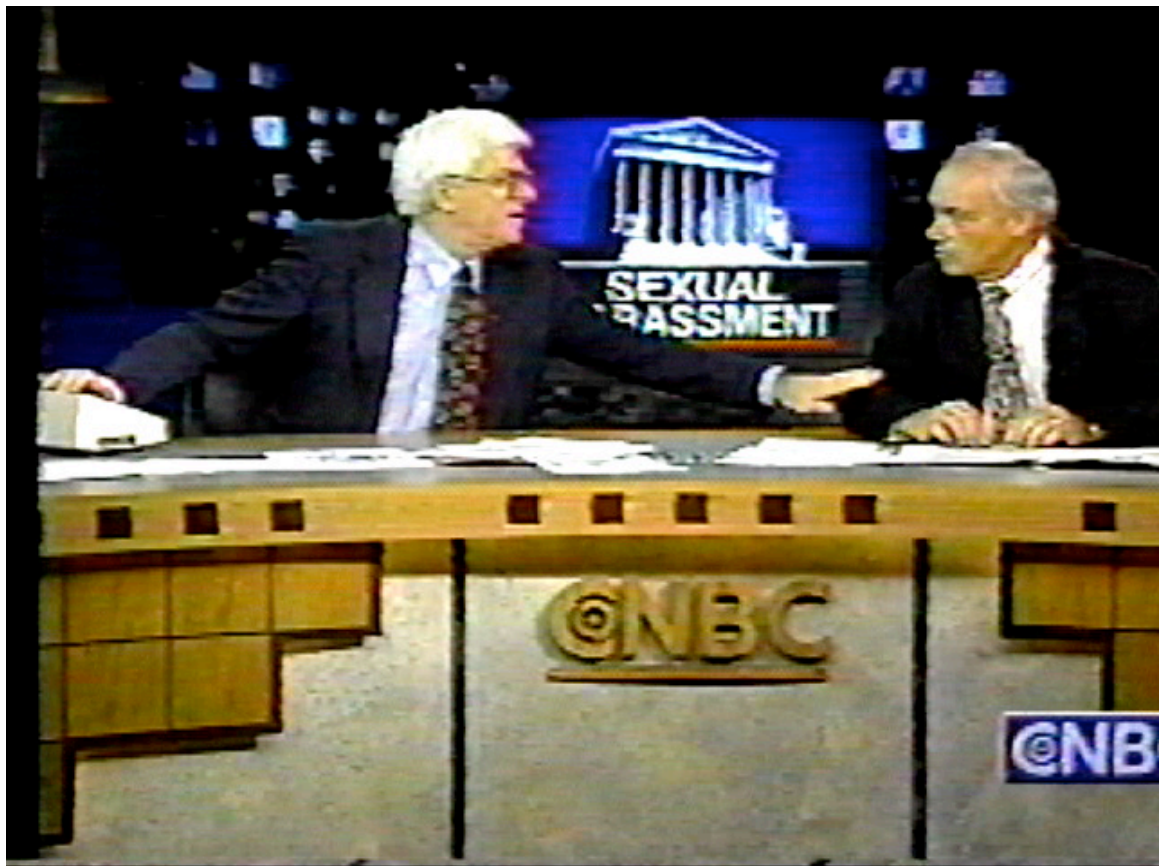
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PICTURE 1



'are you there?'

PICTURE 2



'jus' to gi-'